
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Capitol Hill Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	1321-1323 Constitution Avenue, NE	() Consent
		(x) Concept
Meeting Date:	March 22, 2012	(x) Alteration
Case Number:	12-260	() New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Amanda Molson	() Demolition
		() Subdivision

Prospective purchasers Martin Ditto and Robert Bailey of Ditto Residential request concept approval for rear and rooftop additions to 1321-1323 Constitution Avenue, NE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

Property Description

Currently used for residential purposes, 1321-1323 Constitution Avenue, NE are joined internally and share one lot. This masonry building was constructed in 1910 for owner Domenic Del Vecchio, according to designs prepared by architect A.H. Beers. Some years ago, a rooftop addition to 1323 was started and never completed (there is no evidence of Board review for this project), leaving a failing masonry wall on the rear elevation. The property also includes a one-story rear garage. The abutting neighbor to the left (east) is a former commercial building now used by a church, and the abutting neighbor to the right (west) is a three-story, multi-unit building of recent construction.

According to his obituary, Domenic Del Vecchio was the founder of what would become the Peoples Hardware Store, opening his first hardware store in the one-story building at 1325 Constitution Avenue, NE, next door to the subject property.¹ In addition to constructing 1321-1323 and 1325 (also with A.H. Beers as architect), Del Vecchio was responsible for the construction of commercial buildings at 1319 and 1329 (in 1909 and 1912 respectively).² In 1911, owner Catherine Geddes constructed a one-story commercial building at 1327, and 1331 was constructed in 1922 by owner Lodovico Trapani. 1333 was constructed in the 1950s.

1319 through 1333 were all one-story in height when originally constructed, creating a small commercial corridor set within an otherwise residential block of single-family dwellings. However, during the 1930s and 1940s, this continuous row of one-story buildings underwent significant changes in massing. 1321 (subject property), 1325, 1327, and 1329 received second stories, all within the period of significance for the Capitol Hill Historic District. In 2005, the

¹ "Del Vecchio, Founder of Stores Here." *Washington Post* (May 24, 1958).

² Del Vecchio later opened a much larger hardware store on H Street, NE, and he had operated 18 branches in DC, Maryland, and Virginia by the time of his death in 1958.

Board approved demolition of Del Vecchio's former commercial building at 1319 due to its deteriorated state and the resulting loss of integrity; it was replaced with the three-story apartment building. 1333, deemed non-contributing due to its later date of construction, was replaced with an apartment building in 2004 following Board review. As a result, only 1323 and 1331 are still one-story in height (two out of eight buildings total), and the 1920s was the last decade in which all of the buildings remained at this consistent, one-story height.

During the 1930s and 1940s, most of the buildings, including 1321-1323, also lost their projecting storefronts, wood-paneled kneewalls, original entry doors, and original trim. Further, what was once a heavily commercial row (providing space for the hardware store, plumbers, sign and ladder manufacturers, a dry cleaner, and a sign painting company) has turned over to mostly residential use.

Proposal

A second story would be added to the one-story building at 1323, matching the height, materials, and fenestration of 1321. A third floor, rooftop addition, set back sufficiently to render it not visible from Constitution Avenue, would be added across the building. A rear addition, clad in hardiplank or wood siding, would continue the rooftop addition and the rear plane of the first and second floors, extending a three-story mass into the backyard. On the front elevation, the applicants have committed to work with HPO to closely replicate the original storefronts dating to 1910, including reinstating the missing windows. The rear garage would be demolished, replacing it with uncovered parking.

Evaluation

The most challenging aspect of this project in terms of appropriate preservation practices is the proposal to add a second story to the one-story portion of 1323. The Board has been fairly conservative in reviewing requests to increase the height of one-story commercial buildings, understanding that this change in massing significantly alters what is arguably the most character-defining feature of these otherwise understated buildings.

Capitol Hill has several remaining rows of one-story buildings (see attached photos), many of which maintain their historic "feeling," "setting," and "design" in use, massing, architectural detailing, or all of these elements.³ In contrast to those examples, the 1300 block of Constitution Avenue, NE has already seen significant changes in massing to its one-story buildings, changes that began as long ago as the 1930s. In addition to the second stories that have been added to 1321, 1325, 1327, and 1329, much taller apartment buildings have since replaced 1319 and 1333. Further, the ground floors of the former commercial buildings have experienced substantial alterations.

³ The National Register traditionally recognizes a property's integrity through seven aspects, with "feeling" described as, "the quality that a historic property has in evoking the aesthetic or historic sense of a past period of time. Although it is itself intangible, feeling is dependent upon the aid's significant physical characteristics that convey its historic qualities." The quality of "setting" is defined as, "the physical environment of a historic property that illustrates the character of the place. Integrity of setting remains when the surroundings of an aid to navigation have not been subjected to radical change." The quality of "design" is defined as, "the composition of elements that constitute the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property."

Whether these changes would be appropriate today or not, there is clearly an established pattern of change on this block that has allowed these particular buildings to grow and evolve. As a result, the historic context is considerably fractured as compared to the c. 1910 streetscape, and the subject properties have suffered some loss of historic integrity. This isolated situation argues for some flexibility, and approval of this project would not serve as a precedent-setting case that would necessarily apply to Capitol Hill's other one-story buildings.

Although a mockup of the proposed third floor on 1321 shows that it will not be visible from directly across the street, constructing a mockup of a third story on the one-story building at 1323 was not possible and thus made evaluating visibility of 1321 from oblique angles difficult. As a result, the applicants have prepared perspective renderings and have already made initial adjustments to the setback. They have also committed to working with the HPO as final drawings are prepared and as construction gets underway in order to ensure that the rooftop additions are not visible from Constitution Avenue. Fortunately, the generous depth of the buildings affords the opportunity to push the additions back somewhat further, if needed.

One approach might be to design the new second story on 1323 in a more contemporary vocabulary that calls out its arrival as a wholly new element. However, the more appropriate solution in this case, considering the relatively simple nature of these buildings and the long-time unification of 1321 and 1323, is to utilize a streamlined design that matches its mate and settles calmly into the streetscape.

The proposal to restore the ground-floor storefront windows and transoms is a welcome part of this project, as much for aesthetics reasons as historic preservation reasons. 1321-1323 have been "mates" since their construction in 1910, but that sense of continuity was lost when 1321 received its second story and when their storefronts were altered differently. This portion of the project allows the buildings to once again be visually united, and it also returns a much less formidable building face to the streetscape. The applicants should consult with HPO on final detailing for the facades.

The demolition of the rear garage, which has been modified over time and is in need of repairs, raises no significant preservation issues. The Board has generally been flexible in the treatment of one-story garages, particularly those not prominently visible from the street, and has in some cases allowed their demolition (22 3rd Street, NE) or alterations such as increasing their height (313 9th Street, SE; 223 10th Street, SE).

The applicants have shared two options for the rear elevation with HPO – one in which the three stories are flush, and one in which a 6' setback is utilized on the third story (providing a small deck area). Although the addition will extend this property deeper into the backyard than its abutting neighbors, it is not evident that a small setback, especially one so shallow as 6', would make a marked difference in relieving the massing as viewed from the alley (especially if it might come at the cost of visibility from the front). However, a small rear setback would certainly be compatible.

Because the applicants envision multiple units for this property, they should also work with HPO and Pepco to coordinate placement of the meter boxes. Under no circumstances should the

utility meters be placed on the front elevation of the buildings; instead, the boxes should be placed in a common area inside the building or on the rear elevation.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board approve the concept as consistent with the purposes of the preservation act and delegate final approval to staff. However, this should not be construed as approval for any necessary zoning relief.